

Valerie Bingham was born in Enfield, in 1934. She was educated at Latymer Grammar School, and had a brief spell at R.A.D.A before the money ran out.

She met Jack at an amateur theatre company, and they married in 1959. They have two sons, and currently reside in Ludlow, Shropshire.

Valerie has always had a passion for poetry and prose, and has had pieces published. However, this is her first full length book, prompted by her experiences in dealing with her husband's illness. She found the writing process to be cathartic, and hopes the book will help others in similar circumstances.

THE ROCKY ROAD TO LA-LA-LAND

(A Descent into Alzheimer's)

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*This book is dedicated to all the people
who have given Jack tender loving care during his illness.*

*In particular, Ashfield House, Bradeney House,
and Helena Lane Day Care*

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Dropped Stitch

I have just finished talking to my husband Jack on the phone. It wasn't a very satisfactory conversation – it seldom is these days but I can picture him secure and cosy in his residential home. Christmas 2010 came and went and now there were the interminable bank holidays to get through. This was our first Christmas apart in fifty-one years, except when I gave birth on Christmas Eve to our youngest son in hospital. It wasn't too bad actually – Christmas that is. I finally got custody of the remote control and pulled my armchair nearer the fire, toasted my toes and watched my favourite TV programmes with a box of chocolates and a bottle of ginger wine close to hand.

Mind you, it wasn't quite what I had envisaged. The plan had been to travel by train to my youngest son and his family in Hove and then to my other son in London on Boxing Day, finally meeting up with my niece on the 27th, but some awful weather had put paid to all that. I had been invited to have dinner with Jack in his home but had no means of getting there as he was in another town. More of that later.

As a turkey for one person was out of the question, I roasted a small partridge with all the trimmings and finished my meal with the remains of a three-day-old trifle. That is

the kind of thing that happens when you are catering for one and can't bear to waste food.

We have been a long time getting to this point and have leapt many hurdles since I first realised there was something wrong with him, Alzheimer's, like childbirth, is a different experience for everyone. With childbirth, some have a quick, violent labour, while others go on seemingly forever, but the outcome is usually a healthy baby. Jack's illness was of the seemingly forever kind; the outcome was that an intelligent, even-tempered man had taken seventeen years to turn into a stranger living in a world of his own. But it hasn't been all doom and gloom and we have had some good times on the way.

We originally came from Enfield in Middlesex, or north London as we are supposed to call it these days. In 1965 we moved to Hove in Sussex but in 1989, when Jack was fifty-seven, the car insurance firm he worked for was taken over and he was made redundant, or as good as – he was offered a transfer to Southampton but that didn't hold any appeal for us.

When the children were young, we used to go on long holidays, which is how we discovered the delightful market town of Ludlow in Shropshire. We always said we would like to retire there one day. Now it looked as if that day had come, earlier than we expected but what the hell – we put our house on the market. The timing wasn't great, it was the beginning of a recession and house prices were dropping overnight. Brighton and Hove became bed-sit land, shops and hotels were closing and the lawns of the beautiful Brighton Pavilion became a mecca for alcoholics. The beaches were strewn with needles as the drug problem

escalated. We couldn't wait to move out, but wait we had to – for two-and-a-half years.

Hardly anyone viewed our property and we were thankful when a young couple offered us a price that we would have turned down as ludicrous at the outset. We accepted immediately, but the weeks before we exchanged contracts were agony. Our buyers both worked for Sussex University, which was shedding staff; it only needed one of them to lose their job for our sale to go belly-up. Fortunately for them and us this didn't transpire, and we moved to Ludlow at Easter 1992.

The removal van broke down on the motorway (the first time ever, they said). We were getting ringing tones in the kitchen but as our phone was on the van we couldn't answer them. We had no idea what was going on or where all our worldly goods were. We sat on the floor of the front room eating fish and chips while our cat, who appeared to be suffering a nervous breakdown, ignored the fish and prowled the house emitting blood-curdling yowls before getting himself shut in a cupboard. The van eventually arrived at six p.m. and the men worked their socks off getting in our furniture. We left the cat in the cupboard. It seemed kinder somehow, but it didn't make for a very auspicious start!

After about eighteen months we joined the local amateur dramatic society. Jack and I have always been interested in the theatre and it has been a strong bond between us over the years. In fact we first met at a theatrical society in Enfield. Although I hadn't immediately been bowled over by his looks and personality, I was impressed with his acting ability (people join a theatre company for

many reasons, not necessarily because they have talent—rather like *The X-Factor*). I always said to Jack that if he hadn't been able to act, our relationship would never have got off the ground.

The Ludlow society was always short of men, so it wasn't long before Jack was cast in a play. He possessed a near-photographic memory, which is ironic seeing the way things have turned out. He only had to read a script a few times to be almost word perfect. I envied him this gift, because I had to study hard to learn my lines.

As was our usual custom I offered to hear his lines — and was surprised at how often he stumbled or improvised, which was quite out of character. Even when the show went on I felt uneasy for him; he appeared to be struggling, although he didn't take a prompt in the three performances. When I tactfully alluded to this he hotly denied he had a problem and said he was concentrating on his Welsh accent.

Looking back, I think this was the first indication that something wasn't right. Was this the crucial period when his brain dropped a stitch and slowly, very slowly, his head started to unravel?

Holidays and Hobbies

Moving house is traumatic at the best of times let alone moving halfway across the country. It took us a while to feel really settled and make new friends but I finally thought we were getting there. I was more than happy pottering about in our lovely new garden, far bigger than our previous one, but I sensed Jack was rather at a loose end. Apart from the aforementioned theatre company he didn't know how to fill his time. He was used to playing sports; in the early days, football and cricket and latterly golf; but there was a waiting list for the local golf club. It was some while before he found a sponsor and finally became a member. At last he was able to play as often as he pleased and take part in occasional away matches.

Between redundancy and the two-and-a-half years it took to sell our house he had endeavoured to find work- if only part-time. Worthing golf club took him on for one day a week in their pro shop; he was only paid a pittance and it wasn't long before they replaced him with a student who was willing to work for even less money. The Job Centre wasn't much help, saying their books were full of people like him – middle aged and middle management. Now, here in Shropshire, he was almost sixty-two and he must have felt on the scrap heap.

Our original intention had been to open a shop but the meagre profit we made on our house put paid to that idea, so instead we took a stall at the antiques and flea market. It only took place on Sundays and we were more flea than antiques: we sold books, prints and odd pieces of china. Jack took care of the book side of things and I hunted out china at car-boot sales and charity shops. Those were the days when people weren't so aware of the true value of their possessions and there were real bargains to be had. I can't say it was a living, more of a hobby, but it was very interesting- although not much fun in the winter months as it was in the open air.

We decided the time had come to take a holiday, so we booked with a company that did tours in the Scottish Highlands. Their head office was in Glasgow but they had a sub-office in Hereford and had hotels at all the well-known lochs. As they practically took you from door to door it required little effort on our part. Our hotel was at Loch Lomond and we thoroughly enjoyed the stay, so a year or so later we booked for another one in a different location – but things didn't go so smoothly this time.

The coach took us on daily sightseeing trips and dropped us off at various places with strict instructions to be back at a certain time and place. I don't like wearing a watch so I used to leave that side of things to Jack, but I soon realised I had better pay attention as he often forgot the time, and in some instances the pick-up point. We would end up frantically looking for one of our fellow passengers in order to check when we were due back.

On one occasion we had a whole day in Edinburgh and went to a place on Princes Street for coffee. The restaurant

was on the third floor and boasted magnificent views of the city. It was pretty crowded so I secured a table while Jack queued up for refreshments, but when he came back he had forgotten his sugar and had cheese scones and jam I laughed about it and offered to exchange the scones but he got all huffy and proceeded to spread jam on his cheese scone, as if to defy me. To change the subject I pointed out the large notice forbidding people to go on the balconies because they were unsafe. Shortly afterwards I nipped to the ladies, but when I returned there was no sign of him. To my horror he was out on the balcony, happily taking photos.

Another time, in Fort William, he announced he had lost his wallet. We revisited all the shops we had been to but nobody could help us. In the end we went to the police station and left our names, telephone number and address, in the hope that someone would hand it in. Jack seemed curiously unconcerned about this, but I was worried that I didn't have enough money to cover the rest of the holiday and had great difficulty ascertaining what credit cards had been in the wallet. I was very relieved to find it on the floor of the coach when we returned; it must have fallen from his coat when he took it down from the luggage rack.

Meal times presented problems too, as he instantly forgot what he had ordered from the menu and related stories that he had previously regaled our dining companions with the evening before. When I tried to jokingly deflect him from this, he flew at me. I don't know who was the more embarrassed, our friends or me.

One evening we went for a stroll around the hotel garden, but as it grew colder I suggested we go back inside for a drink. Jack insisted we go through the back entrance,

which we had never done before. After practically forcing the door open we were met with a loud alarm and a posse of staff. It took some explaining and I couldn't look them in the eye next morning at breakfast.

All these things sound so trivial but I knew in my heart it was not his normal behaviour. But when we returned home he was more like his old self and I began to think I was making a mountain out of a molehill. Did he sense I was watching him? Was I making him nervous?

One of the things I have learnt over the years is that you start to think that everything is your fault. If he couldn't find something, I must have moved it. If he went down the road for a newspaper, milk or to post a letter, and forgot, then I hadn't explained things properly. His excuses were so plausible that I really believed him.

I was finally convinced that it wasn't my imagination when I was asked to direct a Neil Simon play called *Barefoot in the Park*. I cast Jack as the telephone man. It was a small part, right up his street, and I fully expected him to steal the scene. Briefly the plot is about a young pair of newlyweds who buy their first flat in New York. The flat is up umpteen flights of stairs and the elevator doesn't work, and the running joke is that all their visitors arrive in a state of collapse. The play opens on a bare stage with the woman attempting to decorate as the telephone man arrives to install the phone. Jack captured the Bronx accent beautifully and did some inspired business about being exhausted, but he kept forgetting his lines.

Rehearsals became chaotic because not only were his lines all over the place but he couldn't remember his moves, in spite of marking them in his script. I went over the same

ground with him again and again but it was of no use because by the time the next rehearsal came around, we were back to square one.

Between the first and second scenes the flat had to be transformed with the addition of a small kitchen, furniture, curtains, pictures and plants. It was not an easy task and would have been better had it happened in the longer time between acts, but playwrights never think of things like that. Our theatre had no curtains, so rather than have the stage hands floundering around in semi-darkness I decide to make a feature of the scene change. I had them all dressed in sweatshirts printed with the logo of Bloomingdale's, the famous New York store, and played 'busy' music accompanied by a purple lighting effect. The intention was that there was always something for the audience to watch. It should have worked perfectly.

At the technical rehearsal – a run-through to test the staging – we tried the change several times but something always went wrong. I couldn't understand why, until the stage manager took me aside and, with barely suppressed irritation, explained it was all Jack's fault: he hadn't a clue as to what he was supposed to be doing. Happily on the night everyone covered for him, and the audience gave their hard work a round of applause.

I knew then that he wasn't to be trusted with anything complicated. It grieved me terribly because he was such a good actor with a wonderful feel for comedy – I didn't want to think that this might be his swansong.

After that we coasted along as before but I couldn't help wondering what was coming next. As it happened, I didn't have long to wait. Our youngest son, Miles, and his partner

Michelle had moved from Hove to a village in the West Sussex countryside. They were eager for us to see their new home so Jack drove us there for a short break in the summer. Miles took us on a tour of the area at the weekend but the couple had to be back at work on Monday, so we were left to our own devices for three days.

We intended to have a day in Brighton and were ready for an early start, when Jack said he would just pop out for a paper and petrol. There was a little row of shops and a garage quite near so I assumed he was going there, but he didn't come back. I waited for ages and stood outside the front door looking for him; we didn't have mobile phones then.

I pictured him driving around in circles and getting further and further away. Should I call the police? Jack would be furious if he turned up five minutes later. I didn't like to ring Miles at work and anyway, what could he do? Finally I stuck a note on the front door in case Jack came back and went to a triangle of grass with an A-road and a couple of B-roads running round it. Fortunately there was a bench, so I sat there trying to look in three directions at once in the hope that Jack would drive past, although how I was going to attract his attention I had no idea. After an hour I gave up.

By now I was sick with worry and convinced that Jack was completely lost. My only hope was that we were near a large windmill. Surely that would stick in his mind? He could ask someone for directions to it – but then again Jack was a man and hated asking for help.

Eventually I heard a car draw up. I rushed to the door. I was very good – I didn't scream, "Where have you been?" much as I wanted to. He looked tired and strained so I told

him to sit in the garden and I'd bring him out a cup of tea. We sipped our tea and I waited for an explanation, no matter how bizarre, but he never said a word. Perhaps he didn't realise he had been gone for two-and-a-half hours!